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Perceived obligations of stepfathers to financially support their stepchildren; Public perceptions of stepfathers' obligations to financially support their stepchildren

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Perceived Obligations of Stepfathers to Financially Support Their Stepchildren

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Public Perceptions of Stepfathers' Obligations to Financially Support Their Stepchildren

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Abstract

Increased rates of divorce and repartnering, and debate over child support fairness, have sparked research investigating societal expectations about stepfathers' financial obligations towards stepchildren. The present paper reviews literature pertaining to normative financial responsibilities of stepfathers, and trends in cohabitation and maternal employment that may affect perceived stepfather obligations. A theoretical approach integrating the normative expectations perspective, distributive justice theory and justice motive theory provided a framework for examining the different factors considered in determining family duties. The literature suggested that stepfathers are perceived to have a degree of financial obligation to stepchildren, with certain limitations. Further research into the extent of perceived financial obligations of cohabiting and married stepfathers, and processes underpinning judgements of kinship responsibilities, is recommended.

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Public Perceptions of Stepfathers' Obligations to Financially Support Their Stepchildren

In any society, individuals are connected in a network of relationships that are considered to confer certain obligations (Wolfson, Handfield-Jones, Glass, McClaran & Keyserlingk, 1993). Some of the obligations of family members are formalised through legislation, while others are considered moral responsibilities (Wolfson et al., 1993). Social trends such as increased rates of divorce and repartnering through marriage or cohabitation have reduced the likelihood a child will grow up in a household with both biological parents (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). These trends raise many questions about who is kin and what familial obligations exist after divorce and remarriage (Coleman & Ganong, 2000).

Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that in 2003, 33% of marriages involved a partner who was entering a second or subsequent marriage, with many of these marriages creating stepfamilies (ABS, 2003a). Many other divorced parents repartner in defacto relationships (Glezer, 1997). Statistics on the percentage of Australian families that are stepfamilies vary from 7% (ABS, 2003b) to an estimated 20% (Martin, 1998), depending on whether non-resident stepfamilies are included.

With a significant proportion of children likely to live in stepfamily households for at least part of their childhood, the issue of who is responsible for providing for these children financially is an important topic requiring clarification within families and also within government policy. At present, different government policies send conflicting messages about the level of financial responsibility expected of stepparents (Murphy, 1998). Although stepparents have no legal rights or duties towards stepchildren, some government agencies, such as Centrelink, take stepfathers' incomes into account on the assumption that income will be shared with a partner and her children.

Understanding public perceptions of stepfathers' obligations to children is useful for gauging how consistent social policy is with widely held expectations and values, (Ganong, Coleman & Mistina, 1995; Lin, 2000), as well as adding to knowledge of distributive justice decisions in the area of family obligations (Lerner & Mikula, 1994). Recent research showed that the majority of Australians believe a stepfather's income should influence child support payments by the children's father (Smyth & Weston, 2005), suggesting stepfathers are perceived to have some degree of financial responsibility towards their stepchildren.

The present paper aims to examine the literature pertaining to societal beliefs about the perceived financial obligation of stepfathers towards their stepchildren. Social trends that are likely to affect perceived obligations in stepfamilies, such as dual responsibilities to children from previous marriages, cohabitation, and changes in gender roles will also be discussed. Research on normative expectations of family, and the distributive justice principles that underpin such expectations will be drawn upon to provide a theoretical framework.

In this study, *stepfamilies* are defined as families composed of a couple, either defacto or married, in which one or both partners has children by another partner, either living with or visiting the couple (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). *Remarriage* is used here to refer to a marriage in which at least one of the partners has previously been married to another person (Hughes, 2000). *Repartnering* refers to a marriage or defacto relationship in which one or both partners have previously been married to somebody else (Hughes, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

In a review of stepfamily research, Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000) recommended the need for more theoretical grounding, as researchers in this area have not always applied

and discussed conceptual frameworks underpinning their studies. Theory-based research into societal beliefs about the obligations between kin has generally used either a normative beliefs approach, or a distributive justice framework. Another relevant theory, justice motive theory, stems from distributive justice theory but emphasises relationships. These approaches differ slightly in focus, but are compatible with one another and based on the same social psychology concepts.

Social psychologists have conceptualised obligations as part of the set of norms associated with a particular role (Lerner & Mikula, 1994). A role is composed of the norms (appropriate behaviours according to social expectations) assigned to a particular social position (Rodgers & White as cited in Fine, Ganong & Coleman, 1997). According to Lerner and & Mikula (1994), these roles shape people's perceptions of their obligations (what others are entitled to receive from them). The terms 'responsibility' and 'duty' are used interchangeably with 'obligation', as they are considered equivalent in the implementation of kinship behaviours (Finch, 1989).

Normative Beliefs Framework

The terms 'normative beliefs', 'normative expectations' and 'normative obligations' refer to widely held societal expectations about appropriate behaviour (Coleman & Ganong, 1998; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Although people may not always act in accordance with their own beliefs or perceived expectations of others, normative beliefs provide a set of guidelines that are used when making judgements and decisions about behaviour (Finch, 1989). The normative beliefs approach has focussed on identifying societal norms about the structure of kinship obligations (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). This structure involves the presence and the level of obligations perceived to exist between different family members (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Distributive Justice Theory

The other significant theoretical approach that has been applied to family obligations is distributive justice theory. While normative beliefs research aims to identify the perceived obligations associated with different kin relationships (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), distributive justice research aims to identify principles people use when allocating rewards or responsibilities, and investigate the situations which lead to the use of one principle over another (Mikula & Lerner, 1994). The most prominent of the principles guiding distribution decisions are equity, equality and need (Mikula & Lerner, 1994). Equity is achieved when each person receives outcomes proportionate to their inputs (Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994). Equality involves dividing rewards (or obligations) equally among the people involved (Clark & Chrisman, 1994). The principle of need prescribes distributing resources based on the needs of the people involved (Clark & Chrisman, 1994). A number of other principles of distributive justice, such as reciprocity (repaying past contributions), have also received empirical support (Drake & Lawrence, 2000; Schaeffer, 1990). Most people apply these principles in response to situational cues (Clark & Chrisman, 1994; Drake & Lawrence, 2000; Scott, Matland, Michelbach & Bornstein, 2001).

Justice Motive Theory

Justice motive theory (Lerner, 1981) aims to explain the use of principles of distributive justice in different types of relationships. According to this theory, people classify relationships into three categories, each associated with the use of certain distributive justice principles (Lerner, 1981). An *identity* relationship is the closest type of relationship and involves a high level of empathy, so the identities of the people in the relationship become merged to some degree (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994). As concern for the other's needs is paramount, the principle of need is most likely to be applied.

The second type of relationship is a *unit* relationship (Lerner, 1981). In a unit relationship the other is seen as similar to the self (Lerner, 1981). Unit relationships involve cooperation combined with independence, and are associated with equality or equity principles (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994). Thirdly is the *non-unit* relationship, which is the least emotionally close (Finn & Powers, 2002). In this type of relationship, the other person is viewed as different from the self (Lerner, 1981). People in non-unit relationships are likely to be competitive, aiming to maximise their own positive outcomes (Lerner, 1981).

A reward to the other person is seen according to the type of relationship. In an identity relationship the reward goes to *me,* in a unit relationship the reward goes to *us,* while in a non-unit relationship the reward goes to *them* (Lerner, 1981). In close relationships, cues such as the partner's behaviour may cause shifts in how the relationship is classified (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994). A couple's relationship may fit each of the categories on different occasions (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994).

Integrating the Theories

A framework consisting of five normative guidelines has been proposed to describe the processes involved in determining kinship obligation (Finch, 1989). While the last two guidelines refer to developmental issues affecting kinship obligations in later life, the first three guidelines are relevant in assessing family responsibilities towards minor stepchildren. These three guidelines also approximate the focus of each of the three theoretical approaches outlined above. The first guideline involves considering the person to whom an obligation may exist, including gender and the structural or genealogical relationship between the two parties (Finch, 1989). This resembles the focus of normative beliefs research such as that by Rossi and Rossi (1990). The second guideline suggests that

people assess the emotional relationship (Finch, 1989), which is similar to the justice motive perspective that emotional closeness will influence the distribution of resources or responsibilities (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994). The third guideline involves examining the past contributions of the other person to assess reciprocity in the relationship (Finch, 1989). Distributive justice research has explored the use of the reciprocity principle as well as other principles of distributive justice (Scott et al, 2001). Thus each of the three theoretical frameworks may explain one aspect of the weighing up processes behind judgements of family duties.

Gender Issues Contributing to the Perception of Stepfathers' Financial Duty

Consistent with Finch's model (1989) gender-based normative expectations have been found to exert a strong influence in the actual roles and perceived obligations and entitlements in couple relationships including remarriages (Finch & Mason, 1991; Levin, 1997). Lerner and Mikula (1994) state that the traditional roles of husband as provider and wife as nurturer are among the most clear and recognisable of social roles. Although equality is often favoured as a general principle, judgements of specific family obligations are influenced by traditional gender roles, with women expected to take on more caregiving responsibilities and men expected to take on more financial responsibilities (Coleman & Ganong, 1998; Finch and Mason, 1991). The gendered normative expectations of spouse and parent roles are likely to play a large part in determining perceptions regarding stepparents' obligations.

Furthermore, gender role differences contribute to differences in capacity and need that are likely to influence the choice of distributive justice principles. Gendered patterns of child residence versus contact, as well as employment and income, contribute to a situation where stepfathers may have more financial capacity while mothers are likely to have

greater financial need. Men are more likely to be considered the primary breadwinner (even when both partners work full-time) and to work longer hours in paid employment (Cooper & Lewis, 1994; Baxter, 2001). Divorced men are more likely to be contact parents, with associated child support obligations (Smyth & Weston, 2005), but fewer childcare responsibilities impacting on their employment capacity. Conversely, women are more likely to be residential parents after divorce (Smyth & Weston, 2005), and to be disadvantaged by gender related wage inequities (Baxter & Western, 1997). Families headed by a single mother are particularly likely to live in poverty, and therefore researchers have suggested the addition of a stepfather should greatly improve the resources available to children in these families (Hughes, 2000; Jones, 2003).

Although focussing only on stepfathers' financial duties, and not those of stepmothers, could be considered incongruous with societal ideals of equality, gender differences in roles and post-divorce experiences remain a fact that cannot be ignored. Given the gender differences in normative roles and access to resources, it is likely that perceived financial obligations are greater for stepfathers than stepmothers. In addition, the majority of stepchildren spend most of their time in a household with their mother and a resident stepfather (Stewart, 2001). For these reasons, the focus of the present paper is limited to resident stepfather families. Contact-only stepfamilies, resident stepmother families, and same-sex stepfamilies have different dynamics (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Levin, 1997) and are therefore beyond the scope of this paper.

The Impact of Maternal Employment Status on Stepfathers' Financial Obligations

Much of the discussion and research so far has assumed that women and children are likely to be in a position of financial need after divorce. Because kinship obligation is perceived to be greater in situations of need (Finch & Mason, 1991) people may use the

distributive justice principle of need to allocate increased financial responsibility to stepfathers in scenarios where the children are at risk of financial hardship. However, the increase in the number of working mothers means that many women are now likely to be in a position where they can provide for themselves and their children financially.

Statistics show that maternal employment among couple families with dependent children has risen from 45% in the early 1980s (ABS, 2000) to 64% in 2003 (ABS, 2003b). Approximately a quarter of mothers in couple families are employed full time (ABS, 2000). This raises the question of whether stepfathers' perceived financial obligation decreases when need is reduced or absent.

It is possible that between couples, gender roles outweigh equity in distribution decisions. Men seem to retain many aspects of the traditional male provider role, such as maintaining fulltime employment, considering their job/income as 'primary' and contributing fewer hours of housework and childcare than their wives, regardless of whether their wives are employed (Baxter, 2000; Baxter, 2001; Cooper & Lewis, 1994; Steil, 1994). Thus it is possible that stepfathers will be seen as primary providers regardless of their wives' income.

On the other hand, research has found that participants believe that fathers should pay a lower amount of child support when maternal resources are increased through employment (Schaeffer, 1990) or remarriage (Ganong et al., 1995; Schaeffer, 1990; Smyth & Weston, 2005). It seems logical for maternal employment to similarly decrease financial responsibilities of stepfathers, particularly if the perceived financial obligations of stepfathers are influenced by situational factors such as need and capacity rather than entirely based on normative roles. Research examining whether stepfathers' perceived financial responsibility is affected when the mother's need is reduced would allow insight

into the use of role norms, need and capacity, and other principles of distributive justice in the process of determining stepfathers' financial obligations towards stepchildren.

Legislation and the Financial Obligations of Stepfathers

In addition to gender role norms, government regulations also provide guidelines for the kinship obligations of certain family members. In Australia the ambiguous nature of stepfamily roles and obligations are reflected in inconsistent social policy and legislation. Legislation such as the Family Law Act (FLA) 1975 section 66C and Family Court Act (FCA) 1997 section 115 and the Child Support (Assessment) Act 1989, clarifies and formalises the financial obligations of parents towards their biological children after divorce (Smyth & Weston, 2005). However, the legislation regarding stepparents' obligations is much less clear. As Murphy (1998) pointed out, various government policies regarding the obligations of stepparents can seem contradictory. For example the FCA 1997 section 116 (and FLA 1975 section 66D) states that stepparents have a duty to maintain a stepchild only if a court order is made to that effect, and any stepparent duty to stepchildren is secondary to parents' duty to maintain children. This indicates that stepparents may in some cases have an obligation towards stepchildren, but only in the unusual circumstances of a court order. The Child Support Agency places a fairly low level of responsibility on stepparents, with child support payments unaffected by repartnering of the resident parent. However, child support payments are reduced somewhat when the contact parent acquires dependent stepchildren. This sends a mixed message, as in one case stepfather obligations reduce child support payments while in the other they do not.

A third agency, Centrelink, places stepparents including defacto partners in a role with much greater obligations. Where a couple are married or living in a "marriage-like relationship" the partners income affects Social Security entitlements, generally reducing

the eligibility of low-income parents and children for certain payments (Centrelink, n.d.). It is assumed that when living together, income will be shared between partners and between parents and children (ABS, n.d.). By implication, the wealthier partner is expected to shoulder sufficient financial responsibility to cover the expenses of the other partner and any children in the areas where entitlements are reduced.

Although the Family Court Act and Child Support Agency place stepparents in a low-obligation role, Centrelink expects stepparents (including cohabiting stepparents) to take on a higher level of responsibility more similar to that of a parent (Murphy, 1998). Presumably these policies aim to ensure children's basic needs are met, while minimising the need for government expenditure. However, inconsistent policies that technically give stepfathers no rights and responsibilities but in practice may pressure stepfathers into supporting stepchildren may add to the stress experienced by stepfamilies.

Public Perceptions of Stepfathers' Financial Obligations Towards Stepchildren

Normative expectations regarding financial obligations are also less clear-cut for stepfathers than for fathers (Smyth & Weston, 2005). Most research indicates the strongest family obligations exist between biological relatives, especially parents and children, with weaker obligations towards stepfamily members (Finch & Mason, 1991; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Smyth & Weston, 2005). Obligations may also be acquired through emotionally close relationships in which reciprocal favours are provided (Coleman, Ganong & Cable, 1997; Coleman & Ganong 1998). Contrary to research indicating weak stepfamily obligations, Ganong et al. (1995) suggested that there is a normative expectation that stepfathers will take on a level of financial responsibility for children in their household that is equal to or greater than the responsibility of contact fathers. The use of different methodology and the way results are interpreted may contribute to these opposing views.

Most family obligation research using a normative beliefs framework was conducted in Britain and the U.S.A. in the 1990s, with nothing added in the last 5 years. Hence a number of the studies reviewed are 10-15 years old. However, recent debate in Australia about the fairness of the Child Support Scheme makes the topic of public beliefs about stepparents' financial obligations germane.

Perceived Family Obligations Acquired Through Biological Kinship

Many studies emphasise the higher levels of perceived obligation in the parent-child relationship, and in biological kinship ties in general. For example a British study by Finch and Mason (1991) used vignette surveys to assess normative family obligations between adults. Respondents were asked to decide who should provide assistance in various hypothetical situations. Close relatives were considered more responsible to help, with the strongest obligation between parents and children (Finch & Mason, 1991). Consistent with this finding, Coleman et al. (2000) found that the strongest perceived obligation was to oneself and ones biological children, with more responsibility for 'blood' relatives than non-biological relatives

In a similar study in the U.S.A. Rossi and Rossi (1990) gathered data from 1189 participants about kinship obligations. Their survey used the vignette technique with participants rating the level of obligation of particular kin. The characters in the vignettes were all adults, and spousal obligations were not assessed as the researchers felt few people would disagree that spouses are obligated to provide support to each other. Consistent with findings from the study by Finch and Mason (1991), biological parent-child relationships carried the highest kinship obligations. A weaker perceived obligation existed between in-laws, followed by stepparents and stepchildren. The researchers

suggested that remarriages are perceived as creating weaker kinship obligations than first marriages.

Although obligations were weaker towards stepchildren than biological children, more support for stepchildren was expected than for non-relatives or more distant relations such as nieces or cousins. The choice to focus solely on support between adult kin may have influenced the level of obligation expected of stepfamily members. Stepparents might be perceived as having higher levels of obligation towards minor stepchildren. This could occur due to the resemblance of a stepfamily household to a nuclear family and expectations that similar roles will be adopted (Ganong et al., 1995), or simply because it is expected that children have financial needs that must be met by adults, and perceived family obligations are higher when genuine need is present (Finch & Mason, 1991).

Similar attitudes about parental responsibility have been found in Australia. Despite some disagreement about the specific details of how to fairly determine a parent's financial contribution after divorce, there is general consensus that parents should be expected to provide financially for their children (Smyth & Weston, 2005). An Australian survey of 1741 adults investigated participants' views on the parental responsibilities of mothers and fathers (Funder & Smyth, 1996). The majority of respondents favoured statements that both parents have an ongoing responsibility for their children's financial needs, regardless of whether the parents are married or divorced (Funder & Smyth, 1996). Overall, these studies show that there are widely held beliefs that strong obligations exist between close genetic kin especially parents and children. This is consistent with the normative guidelines model proposed by Finch (1989) that suggests kinship structure is an important factor in creating perceived obligations.

Perceived Family Obligations Acquired Through Relationships

Although the family duties created by genetic closeness are often emphasised, emotional closeness can also create obligations. A set of studies (Coleman et al., 1997; Coleman & Ganong 1998; Ganong et al., 1995) was conducted in the U.S.A. to investigate perceived obligations in various divorce and remarriage situations. Non-biological relatives such as in-laws and step-relatives were typically seen as having no obligations or weaker obligations. However acquired obligations were considered to be present when the individuals had formed high quality, enduring relationships involving reciprocal favours (Coleman et al, 1997; Coleman & Ganong 1998).

According to justice motive theory, this finding could be explained by the presence of an identity or unit relationship, which leads to more generous distributions of resources (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994). Justice motive research has found that when a relationship is an identity or unit relationship family members are less egocentrically biased, and less likely to see others as unfairly benefited by resource distributions (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994; Taylor & Norris, 2000). The public may apply a similar approach and expect more sharing and generosity between individuals in a close relationship.

From a distributive justice perspective, the pattern of reciprocity means that if one person has done the other a favour it should be repaid (Scott et al, 2001). The emphasis is not on the emotional tone of the relationship, but rather maintaining a fair balance of contributions by each party. It may be that what is measured is the balance of contributions between the adults in the couple, with contributions by a stepfather considered as support to the children's mother.

Qualitative data from research by Coleman and Ganong (1998) indicate that some participants focused on the quality of the relationship and others on reciprocation. This

suggests that relationship closeness and reciprocity are taken into account when determining family obligations, and may be considered independently, providing further support for the normative guidelines model proposed by Finch (1989).

Research considering the distribution of obligations within stepfamilies from a justice motive perspective may be fruitful, given the tendency for stepfamilies to experience an 'us and them' mentality in dividing resources (Jacobson, 1993). While some stepfamilies may be very close, it is not uncommon for close relationships to exist between each parent and their biological children, and between the partners, but more distant or even hostile relationships between stepchildren and a stepparent (Everett, 1998; Pasley, Dollahite & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993). From a justice motive perspective, this would suggest the existence of an identity or unit style spousal relationship promoting the use of a need, equity or equality principle between spouses. However the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild in this situation would be a unit or non-unit relationship, encouraging equity/equality, or competition. Research could explore the possibility that different distributive justice principles may operate within different dyads in the stepfamily unit, and determine whether any perceived obligations of a stepfather to provide for his stepchildren are regarded as contributions to his wife or to his stepchildren.

Perceived Financial Obligations Acquired By Stepfathers

Familial obligations may also be acquired by stepparents through marriage and living as a family unit, according to a vignette study in the U.S.A. by Ganong et al (1995). The residential stepfathers depicted in the vignettes had no biological link to the stepchild, and in some cases did not have time to develop a long-term, quality relationship with the child. Nonetheless, they were viewed by a substantial portion of participants as being financially obligated to stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1995). Despite the general emphasis on biological

ties in determining obligation, participants went so far as to indicate the biological father's responsibility should be reduced when either biological parent remarried.

Presumably this was because stepfathers are seen as having a responsibility for their stepchildren, so the mother's remarriage increased resources for the child, while the father's remarriage divided his resources between a greater number of children (Ganong et al., 1995). The explanation proposed by Ganong et al. (1995) for this finding of strong perceived obligation of stepfathers was that, in the absence of clear role schemas for stepfamilies, people appear to selectively apply to stepfamily situations their beliefs about family responsibilities derived from their schema for nuclear families. The researchers argue that through marrying the child's mother, or residing with the children, the stepfather may acquire perceived responsibilities equal to those of biological parents (Ganong et al, 1995).

It is worth noting however, that the obligation in question in the study by Ganong et al. (1995) was limited to paying for tutoring. Whether this translates to a broader expectation of responsibility is unclear. Finch and Mason (1991) found higher levels of perceived obligation when the required assistance was limited. It is possible that participants saw the bulk of the children's expenses as being the responsibility of the parents (indeed, child support was received in the vignette), and considered the cost of tutoring to be only a relatively small or temporary expense. If this were the case, then higher levels of kinship obligation would be found using the tutoring payment vignette utilised by Ganong et al. (1995) than might be expected for a vignette describing broader or more extensive costs. Furthermore, it may be inappropriate to generalise stepfathers' and fathers' equal perceived obligations in one limited area of expense to indicate a general equality in perceived levels of obligation in all areas.

Research suggests that the perceived obligations of stepfathers towards their stepchildren may carry a number of limitations. Stepfathers' normative financial obligations towards stepchildren end upon dissolution of the marriage to the children's mother (Ganong et al., 1995). In addition there is some evidence that even while the remarriage is intact, children might have limited access to the income of their stepparents. For example, Painter & Levine (2004) found that children from stepfamilies are less likely to go to college than children from intact or single parent homes. The finding was considered surprising, as the addition of a stepfather to the family has often been viewed as a way for children in low-income single mother families to escape poverty. One explanation proposed by Painter and Levine (2004) was that stepchildren do not have access to stepfathers' financial resources. Stepfathers may be unwilling to provide for non-biological children's college expenses, or their resources may be depleted by the costs of having various responsibilities to two sets of children.

Research by Jacobson (1993) supports the suggestion by Painter and Levine (2004) that stepparents may be more concerned with meeting the needs of their biological children than those of their stepchildren. Jacobson (1993) conducted an ethnographic study investigating how stepfamilies apply distributive justice principles in deciding how family resources/costs should be distributed. A major source of tension between the remarried spouses was the desire of each parent to ensure their biological children received a fair share of household resources (Jacobson, 1993).

Reaching consensus on a fair resolution of financial issues was hindered by the fact that people differed in the principles of distributive justice they used (Jacobson, 1993). They also differed in their understanding of these principles. The fact that some members of a stepfamily can have additional obligations or resources outside of the stepfamily unit

complicated distribution judgements (Jacobson, 1993) and may be a factor people take into account when assessing stepfathers' responsibilities to stepchildren.

The findings from a recent Australian study (Smyth & Weston, 2005) suggest that expectations of stepfathers to provide financial support may be limited, particularly when a stepfather also has biological children to support. The study examined the attitudes towards child support held by general community members and divorced parents. The majority of participants thought that when a resident mother repartners, continuation of child support by the children's father should depend on the income of the stepfather (Smyth & Weston, 2005). This finding suggests that stepfathers with the capacity to financially support their stepchildren are expected to do so, taking on some of the costs that would otherwise be covered by child support. However, most participants thought child support payments for biological children should not be reduced when a contact father repartners and acquires stepchildren (Smyth & Weston, 2005). Thus, while both cases involved stepfathers, only in the first scenario were stepfathers perceived to have obligations towards stepchildren that should be considered in determining child support payments. This pattern is opposite to that used by the Child Support Agency (n.d.)

One proposed explanation for this seeming inconsistency is that participants' responses were influenced by whether child support was framed as coming into the household or leaving the household (Smyth & Weston, 2005). An alternative explanation is that stepfathers are considered to have a financial obligation towards stepchildren, but only after obligations towards biological children have been met. This explanation would be consistent with the FCA (1997) and research by Rossi and Rossi (1990), which both suggest that stepparents may have some level of obligation but it is secondary to the obligation of biological parents. If this is the case, then the amount of support expected of

stepfathers may be extremely variable, depending on their prior commitments towards biological children. Further research is needed to clarify the extent of perceived financial obligations of stepfathers towards stepchildren, and whether these obligations are indeed affected by prior responsibilities towards biological children.

Overall, the research literature indicates that stepfathers are perceived as having some degree of financial obligation towards their stepchildren, but that this responsibility may be weaker than, outweighed by, or in competition with, perceived financial obligations towards biological children. There is some empirical support for the normative guidelines framework offered by Finch (1989). Kinship structure appears to be an important factor in evaluating family obligations, with relational closeness and reciprocity also taken into account. The responsibility stepfathers are perceived to acquire upon marriage may be related to their new position on the family tree, or to the closeness and reciprocity expected in a marital relationship. Variations in situational context provided by different researchers' vignettes might explain differences in the degree of obligation attributed to stepfathers. Further research is needed to clarify the nature and extent of perceived obligations of stepfathers, both in general and in the frequently overlooked group of stepfamilies formed by cohabitation rather than marriage.

Cohabiting Stepfamilies

One of the social trends that raises questions about the definition and obligations of family is the increase in cohabitation (Stewart, 2001). Traditionally, family formation has been considered to occur through genetic links or marriage (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). However, increasing numbers of couples with children from past relationships are choosing to live in defacto relationships (De Vaus, 2003; Glezer, 1997; Qu & Weston, 2001). Cohabiting stepfathers are not linked to their partners' children through genetic

links or by legal means such as marriage or adoption, yet they often make substantial contributions towards raising these children (Stewart, 2001).

Over the last thirty years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of couples who cohabit either as a prelude or alternative to marriage (Baxter, 2001). The percentage of currently cohabiting couples increased from 5% of all Australian couples in 1986 to 12% of couples in 2001 (De Vaus, 2003). Although couples who are cohabiting rather than formally married make up only around 12% of all couples at one time, the majority of married couples go through a period of cohabitation prior to marriage (Qu, 2003).

Cohabitation is not only common among younger people not yet ready to commit to marriage, but is also an increasingly popular choice for divorced individuals forming unions in which one or both partners have children from prior relationships (Glezer, 1997). This trend has led researchers to argue for the inclusion of the cohabiting stepfamily structure in research and definitions of stepfamilies (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Stewart, 2001). However, most of the prior research on stepfamilies has excluded this group of families, and therefore may or may not accurately reflect cohabiting stepfamilies.

Cohabiting serves different purposes for different couples. It can function as a stage in courtship, an alternative to marriage, or, most commonly, as a preparation for marriage (Glezer, 1991; Qu, 2003). Social policy is based on the assumption that cohabiting couples will pool resources, and therefore payments to mothers and children are reduced when there is a man living with them in a 'marriage-like relationship' (Murphy, 1998). And indeed, in many families cohabiting stepparents take on financial and emotional responsibility for stepchildren (Stewart, 2001). However, defacto relationships are not always the same as marriages (Stewart, 2001). Cohabitors considered cohabiting to require less commitment (Glezer, 1991; Qu, 2003). Furthermore, defacto couples are less likely to

have joint bank accounts, less likely to be satisfied with parenting roles, and cohabitors with children have lower relationship quality (Glezer, 1997). Cohabitors tend to be more concerned with creating an equitable relationship and have a somewhat more egalitarian division of household labour than married couples (Baxter, 2001; Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994). Cohabiting individuals who have previously been married are much less likely to expect to marry their current partner than cohabitors who have never been married (Qu, 2003). Whether this finding is due to a lower degree of commitment by people who have experienced a divorce or a preference for a defacto relationship as a long-term alternative to marriage is not clear.

Given that defacto relationships have less formalised obligations and are considered to require less commitment, tend to have a less traditional division of labour and less likelihood of sharing a bank account, it would not seem unreasonable to expect that perceptions of financial obligation to stepchildren may be lower for cohabiting stepfathers than married stepfathers. If this is the case, an incongruity would exist between societal justice beliefs, and social policy (such as reduced Social Security entitlements for women and children living in a cohabiting stepfamily). Despite the large number of cohabiting stepfamilies, these families have frequently been omitted from research as they do not fit the traditional definition used in stepfamily research (Coleman et al., 2000; Stewart, 2001). Virtually nothing is known about societal perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of cohabiting stepparents. Research in this area is needed given the large number of children likely to live in cohabiting stepfamilies for at least part of their childhood.

Conclusions

Research into normative expectations about kinship obligations has generally found a stronger level of perceived obligation towards biological family members than stepfamily

members. However, this is not always the case, and it has been proposed that men are perceived to have a greater obligation towards stepchildren in their household than biological children who do not live with them. Methodological differences, such as the type of assistance required and the age of the characters in vignettes, may have contributed to the differing findings and opposing views about perceived obligations of stepfathers. Overall the research suggests a societal belief that stepfathers have some degree of obligation to financially support stepchildren, but this obligation may be less than the obligation towards biological children, and dependent on the stepfather's capacity to provide for stepchildren after providing for any biological children he has. However, further research is needed to establish the scope and extent of perceived financial obligations of stepfathers towards stepchildren.

According to Finch (1989) people use gender, genealogy, emotional closeness, and reciprocity as guidelines to determine familial obligations. Empirical evidence from research based on normative expectations, distributive justice, and justice motive theory, provide support for the use of each of these guidelines. Integrating these theories not only provides a relevant theoretical base for kinship obligation research, it also extends distributive justice research into the area of stepfamily obligations. This is in keeping with Lerner and Mikula's (1994) suggestion of broadening distributive justice research, which had mainly examined reward distributions, to further investigate the distribution of obligations and burdens.

Although some areas of stepfamily research have been investigated extensively, others are still in their infancy. Social trends such as the increase in defacto couples have raised questions about what obligation for a partner's children is acquired when the couple move in together. Empirical research is needed to investigate societal beliefs about the roles and

obligations of cohabiting stepfathers. Similarly, little is known about public perceptions of stepfathers' financial responsibilities when the children's mother is employed. Investigating whether stepfathers are still perceived as having a financial obligation when the mother's need is reduced would shed light on whether other distributive justice principles besides need are used in distribution judgements pertaining to stepfathers' financial obligations. Gaining a more thorough understanding of public perceptions of the nature and extent of stepfathers' financial obligations is potentially beneficial to both psychological theory and social policy.

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Running head: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF STEPFATHERS' OBLIGATIONS

Public Perceptions of Stepfathers' Obligations to Financially Support Their Stepchildren

Miriam Maclean

Abstract

The present study investigated public perceptions of stepfathers' obligation to financially support stepchildren. Two hundred Australians completed vignette-based questionnaires assessing normative expectations of stepfathers financial contribution. A 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects design was used to assess the effects of marital status, maternal employment, and prior child support commitments on perceived obligations to stepchildren. Most participants believed stepfathers should contribute financially, but responses varied greatly. Defacto relationships and maternal employment reduced obligation. A significant 3-way interaction was also found. Qualitative responses were analysed from a normative expectations and distributive justice perspective. Findings support the use and integration of these theories in studying stepfamily responsibilities. Implications and areas for future research were discussed.

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Introduction

The roles and responsibilities of stepparents are often ambiguous. This ambiguity exists within stepfamilies, the law, and societal expectations (Coleman, Ganong & Fine 2000; Everett, 1998). Stepparents are sent mixed messages about the level of financial responsibility they are expected to take for their stepchildren. For example, the Family Court Act 1997 Section 116 states that stepparents have a duty to maintain a stepchild only if a court order is made to that effect, and any stepparent duty to stepchildren is secondary to parents' duty to maintain children. However, some of the policies of government agencies such as Centrelink and the Child Support Agency are based on the assumption that stepparents will financially support stepchildren.

A recent Australian study (Smyth & Weston, 2005) examined attitudes towards child support held by general community members and divorced parents. The majority of participants thought that when a resident mother repartners, child support by the children's father should depend on the stepfather's income, yet child support should not be affected if the father repartners and acquires stepchildren (Smyth & Weston, 2005). Thus, it appears that stepfathers in Australia are considered to have some financial obligations to stepchildren in some circumstances. However, the nature and extent of perceived obligation of stepfathers is unclear and requires further investigation.

Increased rates of divorce and repartnering have resulted in many children growing up in stepfamilies (Stewart, 2001). *Stepfamilies* have been defined as families composed of a married or defacto couple, in which one or both partners has children from a prior relationship (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2003) reported that 10% of Australian families are stepfamilies, however, researchers (including Martin, 1998) using broader definitions of stepfamily have estimated the number to be closer to 20%.

In order to discuss the perceived obligations of stepfathers, *obligation* must be defined. According to Lerner and Mikula (1994), individuals' obligations are what others are entitled to receive from them. Social psychologists have conceptualised obligations as part of the set of norms (socially expected behaviours) associated with a particular role (Lerner & Mikula, 1994). Some obligations associated with family roles are formalised through legislation, while others are considered a moral duty (Wolfson, Handfield-Jones, Glass, McClaran & Keyserlingk, 1993).

There are a number of reasons for studying public attitudes or normative beliefs about family obligations. Normative beliefs provide guidelines for making judgements and decisions about behaviour (Finch, 1989). Public opinion has a relationship of reciprocal influence with government policy (Oskamp, 1991). Understanding public perceptions of family obligations is useful for gauging how consistent social policy is with widely held expectations and values (Ganong, Coleman & Mistina, 1995), and for tracking changes in public attitudes resulting from changes in policy or social trends (Smyth & Weston, 2005).

Furthermore, the study of how people believe resources and responsibilities should be divided within families provides an avenue for investigating justice concepts in close relationships. According to distributive justice theory people use principles such as equality, equity, need, capacity and reciprocity when making decisions about the allocation of resources or responsibilities (Mikula & Lerner, 1994; Scott, Matland, Michelbach & Bornstein, 2001). Equity involves allocating individuals' outcomes in proportion with their inputs (Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994). Equality involves dividing rewards or obligations equally (Clark & Chrisman, 1994). The principle of need suggests distributions should be responsive to individual need (Clark & Chrisman, 1994). Justice motive theory (Lerner, 1981) suggests the use of different distributive justice principles is associated with relationship closeness.

Closeness refers to degree of identification with the other person through merging of identities or sharing membership of a group (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994). People may consider multiple situational cues when making distributive decisions (Drake & Lawrence, 2000; Finch, 1989)

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Finch (1989) suggested that people use a number of normative guidelines when determining the perceived obligation of one individual towards another. These guidelines include considering gender, the genealogical and emotional relationship involved, and reciprocating past favours (Finch, 1989). Research supports the premise that people take these multiple factors into account (Coleman & Ganong, 1998; Finch & Mason, 1991; Taylor & Norris, 2000). There is also evidence that people use other principles of distributive justice besides reciprocity to decide how to allocate resources or responsibilities (Clark & Chrisman, 1994; Drake & Lawrence, 2000; Scott et al., 2001).

Perceived Financial Obligations of Stepfathers

It has been suggested that the first step in family distribution decisions is determining whether someone is a close enough relative to be included in the distribution (Stum, 1999). There is widespread agreement that biological parents have an obligation to provide for their children, with research showing the vast majority of Australian participants believed both parents, whether married or divorced, should share parental responsibilities including financial support of the children (Funder & Smyth, 1996). However, obligations to stepfamily and in-laws have been found to be weaker than obligations to biological family members (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In-laws in studies by Coleman and Ganong (1998) and Stum (1999) were less likely than biological relatives to be included in family distributions, and it is possible that stepparents would be excluded in a similar way.

Contrary evidence was found by Ganong et al. (1995) in a U. S. study of normative expectations of financial support of minor children by stepfathers. The study used a vignette about a young boy who needed tutoring. Results showed the stepfather's perceived obligation to be even greater than that of the nonresident biological father. This was interpreted to mean that living as a family unit conferred perceived parental responsibilities equal to those of biological parents (Ganong et al., 1995). However, whether stepfathers' responsibility for tutoring costs equates with a broader expectation of responsibility is unclear.

Higher levels of perceived obligation occur when the required assistance is limited (Finch & Mason, 1991). It is possible that Ganong et al.'s (1995) participants considered the cost of tutoring to be a small or temporary expense, and therefore reasonable to expect of a stepparent, while the bulk of financial responsibility would still be placed with the biological parents. If so, higher levels of perceived obligation would be found using the tutoring payment vignette utilised by Ganong et al., (1995), than might occur with vignettes describing broader or more extensive costs. Research is needed to assess the robustness of Ganong et al.'s (1995) findings, and to assess public perceptions of stepfather obligation in the Australian cultural context.

Situational Factors Potentially Influencing Perceived Stepfather Obligation

Child Support and Dual Parenting Responsibilities

For divorced fathers, repartnering often results in dual involvement with non-resident biological children and residential stepchildren. Distributive justice principles of need and capacity seem to figure highly in hypothetical child support distribution decisions (Schaeffer, 1990). Two U.S. studies have shown that participants in vignette studies believe the remarriage of either parent should reduce the father's financial contribution (Ganong et al.,

1995; Schaeffer, 1990). The explanation provided for this decrease (Schaeffer, 1990) is that remarriage typically increases a mother's household resources but spreads a father's resources more thinly as he is supporting more family members.

However, in a recent Australian study by Smyth and Weston, (2005) participants seemed to instead prioritise children from the first marriage. Most participants thought child support for non-resident children should not be decreased if a man has additional biological- or stepchildren in a second marriage. Yet most thought that when a resident mother repartners, the stepfather's income should influence the father's child support payments (Smyth & Weston, 2005). This finding suggests that stepfathers with the capacity to financially support their stepchildren are expected to do so, taking on some of the costs that would otherwise be covered by child support. Although both cases involved stepfathers, only in the latter scenario were stepfathers perceived to have obligations towards stepchildren that should be considered in the determination of child support payments.

One possible explanation is that stepfathers are considered to have financial obligations towards stepchildren, but only after obligations towards biological children have been met. This explanation is consistent with the Family Court Act (1997) and research by Rossi and Rossi (1990), which suggest that although stepparents may have some obligation, it is secondary to the obligation of biological parents. If so, the amount of support expected of stepfathers may be extremely variable, depending on prior commitments towards biological children. Research is needed to investigate the impact of dual parenting commitments on perceived obligations towards stepchildren.

Maternal Employment

Whereas a stepfather's prior child support obligations decrease his resources, maternal employment increases the mother's resources. As obligation to family members is perceived to be higher in situations of need (Finch & Mason 1991), stepfathers' perceived obligations to provide financial assistance may be increased if the mother has no employment income of her own. An important outcome of assessing whether maternal employment affects perceived levels of obligation for stepfathers to provide financially towards the costs of their stepchildren will be to illuminate the principles of distributive justice involved.

Marital Status

Another social trend that may influence the perceived obligations of stepfathers to provide for their stepchildren is cohabitation. There are more stepfamilies headed by defacto than married couples (De Vaus, 2003), yet cohabitors have frequently been omitted from research as they do not fit the traditional definition used in stepfamily research (Coleman et al., 2000; Stewart, 2001). Investigation is required to understand societal perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of cohabiting stepparents.

Defacto relationships differ from marriages in a number of ways. Cohabitors consider cohabitation to require less commitment (Glezer, 1991; Qu, 2003). Furthermore, cohabiting couples are less likely to have joint bank accounts, or to be satisfied with parenting roles, and cohabitors with children have lower relationship quality (Glezer, 1997). Cohabiting couples tend to be more concerned with creating an equitable relationship (Baxter, 2001; Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994). These factors, especially the lower commitment and reduced sharing of funds, suggest that cohabiting stepfathers may have lower perceived financial obligation to their stepchildren.

The Present Study

The present study utilised the vignette technique to examine public perceptions of stepfathers' obligation to financially support their stepchildren. Many studies that allude to normative expectations of stepfathers' financial involvement in stepchildren have focussed on whether it affects expectations of child support to biological children (e.g. Schaeffer, 1990; Smyth & Weston, 2005). This study measured public perceptions of stepfathers' duty to support stepchildren, and examined factors affecting perceived financial obligation.

It was hypothesised that as child support costs reduce the stepfather's financial capacity, the presence of biological children would decrease perceived obligation towards stepchildren. Maternal employment, because it reduces need, was hypothesised to decrease perceived obligation towards stepchildren. Finally, it was hypothesised that a defacto relationship would reduce perceived obligations of stepfathers.

Method

Design

The experimental design was a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects design. The three independent variables were marital status (defacto or married), maternal employment (employed or not employed), and child support commitments (biological children supported or no biological children to support). All combinations of the variables were used to create eight vignettes, which comprised the eight experimental conditions. This vignette technique is frequently used in kinship obligation research as it provides a meaningful context for making decisions (Finch, 1987).

The main dependent variable was perceived stepfather financial obligation measured as a percentage. In addition qualitative data from participants' explanations of their distribution decisions were analysed using thematic content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in order

to gain insight into normative beliefs and distributive justice principles underpinning societal expectations of stepfathers' financial duty to financially support stepchildren. Open-ended questions are frequently used in vignette research to allow participants' responses to express their own reasoning rather than being limited to a fixed choice response, while the quantitative measure allows direct comparison of participants' responses (Finch, 1987).

Participants

A sample of 282 participants was recruited in Western Australia, through a number of community and educational settings, including a university, a church, a number of workplaces, and parents and teachers at a school. To access participants who might be less involved in community and work activities, door to door surveying was used to reach participants in a state-owned housing area as well as a middle income suburb. Participants were aged 17-94 years old ($M = 35.54$, $SD = 16.74$). More women ($n = 134$), than men ($n = 63$) participated. This may be partially due to the higher numbers of women present in several of the settings where participants were recruited. It might also be caused in part by a tendency for women to be more interested in volunteering for research on family issues (Ganong et al., 1995). Participants were from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds and education levels. Approximately 47% of participants reported having biological children, and 19% reported having stepchildren.

Due to an unexpectedly high response rate from the university student sample, data from 67 participants were randomly excluded. This was done to maintain a reasonably diverse community sample. In addition, to remedy unequal cell sizes, data from a further 15 participants were discarded, as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001). Again, these participants were chosen randomly from the design cells with excess numbers.

Materials

A pilot study with 10 participants was conducted, resulting in minor changes to increase the clarity of the questionnaire. For the main study, each participant received an information sheet about the study (Appendix A), a four-page questionnaire including a demographic data sheet (Appendix B) and one of the eight versions of the vignette (Appendix C), followed by questions (Appendix D). The vignettes and questions were based on those used by Ganong et al. (1995) to study normative beliefs about stepfathers' financial obligations and adapted to address the research questions of this study. They were also modified to describe general living costs, rather than one specific payment, and to assess the amount participants believe the stepfather should contribute, rather than a yes/no answer. These modifications were expected to elicit responses more suited to a distributive justice framework. The vignettes were kept short to help exclude confounding variables, although this was at the expense of providing more detail. One version of the vignette is shown below:

> Amy and Peter are married. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter has no biological children of his own. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy is in paid work outside the home as well as caring for the children.

Also included in each questionnaire were two single-page questionnaires from other child-support related studies. These questionnaires were combined for the purposes of data collection only, and the findings are not included in this paper.

Participants were asked to respond to three questions. To assess whether stepfathers are perceived to have a financial obligation to stepchildren, quantitative responses were recorded on a scale from 0-100%, representing the percentage of the children's living costs that were not met by child support that the participant believed should be paid by the stepfather.

Responses to two open-ended questions provided qualitative data. These questions asked participants for the reasons why they designated this amount and to list other factors important in such decisions.

Procedure

Potential participants were told briefly about the study and asked if they would be willing to participate. Each participant was provided with a questionnaire and an information sheet including support agency contact details in case participants experienced any distress. Participants were informed that their anonymity would be maintained.

Each participant received one of the eight versions of the questionnaire and was asked to complete it. The score for the first question was a mark made by each participant on a scale from 0-100% representing the amount of financial support the stepfather should provide. Percentage scores were entered into SPSS for analysis. Responses to the open-ended questions were grouped according to experimental condition in preparation for thematic analysis.

Results

Data Screening

Prior to analysis, data were screened to assess accuracy of data entry, missing values, and normality. Data screening of the grouped data showed that many of the within-cell distributions were non-normal. Negative kurtosis was common due to the wide range of responses with the highest score (100%) for the dependent variable a popular response in some of the experimental conditions. However, the responses were considered to be meaningful and representative of the population studied. People's opinions are not necessarily normally distributed in the population, and transformation may reduce the generalisability of results (McKillop, 2001). As the *F* test is robust to violation of

normality of variables when there is adequate sample size (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) the data were retained without transformation.

Descriptive Statistics

All eight experimental conditions produced a very wide range of scores on the dependent variable. Large standard deviations in the dependent variable showed that people's perceptions of stepfathers' obligation varied widely, regardless of family circumstances. This variability in responses appeared to reflect individual differences in opinions rather than differences associated with the demographic variables measured, as grouping data by sex, age, education, being in a marriage-like relationship, and parenting experiences did not reduce variability of scores. Cultural background was not included in this process as the wide variety of open-ended responses were not suitable for quantitative analysis. Means and standard deviations for each of the vignettes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Stepfather Obligation Grouped by Vignette Version

Version	Description	*N*	*M*	*SD*
1	Married, No Child Support, Mother Employed	25	57.00	27.73
2	Married, Child Support, Mother Employed	25	47.00	25.54
3	Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Employed	25	36.20	26.94
4	Defacto, Child Support, Mother Employed	25	49.40	31.2
5	Married, No Child Support, Mother Not Employed	25	67.40	35.00
6	Married, Child Support, Mother Not Employed	25	66.00	35.94
7	Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Not Employed	25	67.20	33.11
8	Defacto, Child Support, Mother Not Employed	25	46.60	33.87

Overall, 92.5% of participants nominated an amount above 0% as the stepfathers share.

Analysis

Levene's statistic showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met. A 2 x 2 x 2 (marital status x child support obligation x maternal employment) between subjects ANOVA was conducted on perceived obligation (percentage of stepchildren's costs not met by child support that participants indicated the stepfather should pay). The alpha level was set at .05.

A significant main effect was found for marital status $F(1, 192) = 4.49$, $p = .03$, with higher perceived obligation scores for married stepfathers ($M = 59.35$, $SD = 31.97$) than cohabiting stepfathers ($M = 49.85$, $SD = 32.89$). A significant main effect was also found for maternal employment $F(1, 192) = 10.68$, $p < .01$. Perceived obligation was higher when the mother was not employed ($M = 61.80$, $SD = 35.10$) than when employed ($M = 47.40$, $SD = 28.50$).

There was no significant effect of stepfathers' child support commitments to biological children on the perceived obligation towards his stepchildren. In addition, no significant 2-way interactions were found. However, there was a significant 3-way interaction between marital status, child support obligation and maternal employment status $F(1,192) = 5.89$, $p = .02$. The ANOVA table is shown as Table 2.

Table 2

ANOVA summary table of the Effects of Marital Status, Maternal Employment and Stepfather's Child Support Commitments on Perceived Stepfather Obligation

Source	*Df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Marital Status	1	4417.59	4417.59	4.49	.04*
Child Support	1	995.94	995.94	1.01	.32
Maternal Employment	1	10506.20	10506.20	10.68	<.01*
Marital Status x Child Support	1	67.71	67.71	0.07	.79
Marital Status x Maternal Employment	1	7.939	7.939	0.01	.93
Child Support x Maternal Employment	1	2135.15	2135.15	2.17	.14
Marital Status x Child Support x Maternal Employment	1	5790.80	5790.80	5.89	.02*
Error	192	188891.74	983.81		
Total	200	809000.00			

As Figure 1 shows, Marital Status has little effect in the No Child Support, Mother Not Employed conditions, and the Child Support, Mother Employed conditions (indicated as 'No Chn, No Work' and 'Chn, Work', respectively). However, Defacto relationships resulted in lower perceived obligation in the Child Support, Mother Not Employed conditions and the No Child Support, Mother Employed conditions.

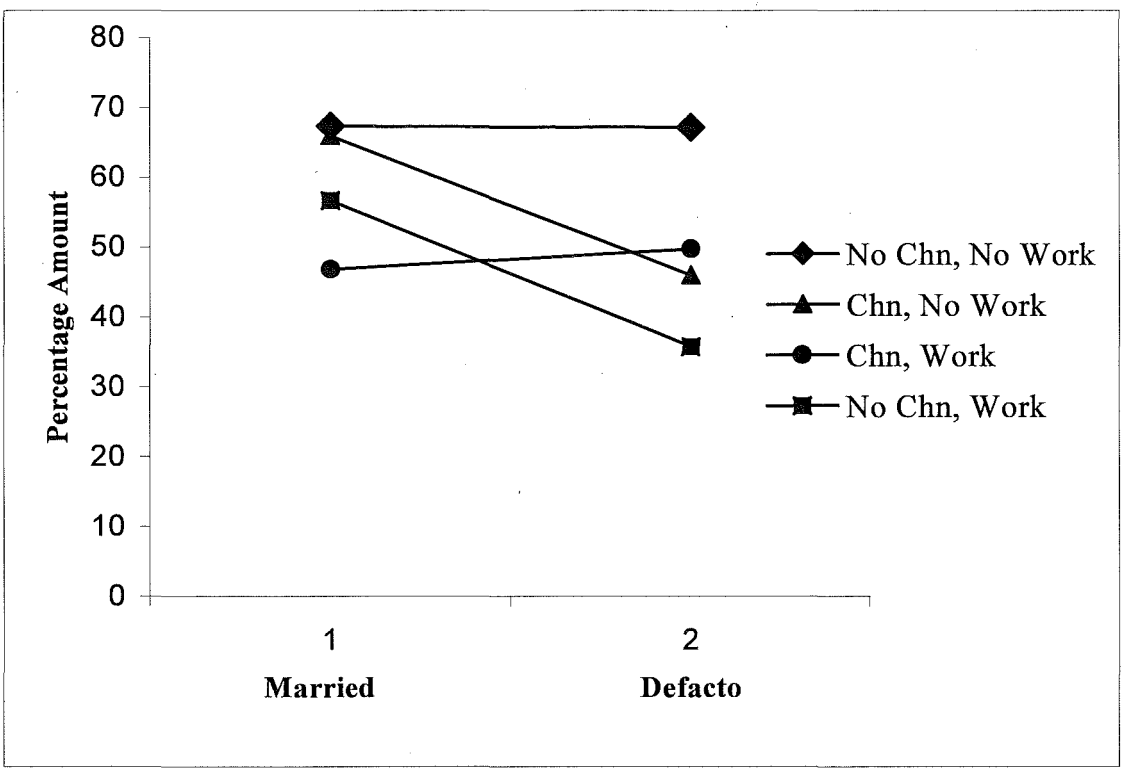

Figure 1. Interaction Effect of Marital Status, Child Support Commitments and Maternal Employment Status on Perceived Stepfather Obligation.

Post-hoc tests performed to investigate the nature of the interaction showed a significant difference between the Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Employed condition ($M = 36.2$, $SD = 27.7$) compared to the three highest scoring conditions: Married, No Child Support, Mother Not Employed ($M = 67.4$, $SD = 35.0$), Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Not Employed ($M = 67.2$, $SD = 33.11$) and Married, Child Support, Mother Not Employed ($M = 66.00$, $SD = 35.94$). The high variability in scores may have reduced the power of the ANOVA, preventing smaller between-groups differences from reaching statistical significance. Significant differences revealed in post-hoc tests are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3
Significant Differences in Perceived Obligation Between Vignette Versions

Version		
Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Employed	<	Married, No Child Support, Mother Not Employed
Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Employed	<	Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Not Employed
Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Employed	<	Married, Child Support, Mother Not Employed

Effect size calculated using η^2 showed that marital status accounted for 2.10% of the variance in perceived obligation, employment status accounted for 4.94% of the variance, and the interaction of marital status x child support obligation x maternal employment accounted for 2.72% of the variance. The low effect sizes are another consequence of high variability in individual beliefs about stepfamily obligations.

Responses to the open-ended questions were examined to illuminate people's reasoning in nominating how much financial support a stepfather should provide. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis methods described by Miles and Huberman (1994). After reading the responses repeatedly to become familiar with the data, responses for each group were minimally reduced (key phrases and sentences drawn out) and displayed on eight single pages for comparison and consideration. Frequently used phrases or ideas were tallied and used to identify themes. As there was overlap in the themes present in responses to question 2 'Please tell us the reasons for your answer to question 1' and question 3 'What other factors are important in this sort of decision and how would they affect your answer?' these themes are discussed together. Common general themes are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

General Themes in Participants' Reasoning About Stepfathers' Financial Obligation

Theme	Examples
Responsibility to Partner/Family	"Having married Amy, Peter should be prepared to support her children as well" (Female, 38) "If he has chosen to be a part of that family he should contribute towards it" (Female, 32)
Equality	"In a committed relationship costs should be shared equally" (Female, 62)
Equity Concerns	"relative amounts paid by Peter and Amy's former husband. Any significant disparity may affect the 100% decision" (Male, 57) "amount Peter and Amy make respectively" (Female, 19)
Not Obligation, Choice	"Obviously if Peter is happy to support other children, great, bu he should not have to, only if he wants to" (Female, 43) "They are not his children, however he may feel as though he wants to support them" (Male, 20) "because he and his partner have the agreement that she will not work, he should provide assistance" (Female, 19)
Responsibility of Biological Parents	"It is the responsibility of the natural father to provide for his children" (Male, 45) "Amy should go out and work and support the kids too – they are her *own* children" (Female, 21)

The most common theme was Responsibility towards Partner/Family. The majority of participants indicated that through his relationship with the mother (49.5% of participants),

or living as a family unit (27.5%), the stepfather had acquired a responsibility to contribute to the children's upkeep. Others emphasised instead the theme of Responsibility of Biological Parents, and believed that because the stepfather was not the children's biological parent he had no obligation (11.5%). Others took a midway position, suggesting that although the stepfather was not obligated to support the stepchildren, he might choose to. Themes of Equity and Equality also emerged, with some participants valuing equality as an ideal for relationships, while others wanted details of all parties' incomes and expenses in order to make an equitable judgement.

To gain a better understanding of the effects of the three independent variables on perceived obligation, the comments about these variables were also examined. Themes are shown in Table 5.

Table 5.

Themes Related to Maternal Employment, Marital Status and Child Support Commitments

Mothers' Resources/Need	"Amy is capable of earning money and also receives child support. The 10% is for cases of emergency" (Female, 21) "in times of need, however, Peter should help out" (Male, 19) "How else are they going to provide for the family if Amy does not work?" (Female, 24)
Defacto Relationships Equivalent to Marriage	"in a normal married or defacto relationship they become a family" (Female, 38) "I am assuming that this is a defacto relationshi and not just a temporary live-in boyfriend. He is therefore playing the 'fathers' role and as such takes emotional, moral and financial responsibility" (Female, 42)
Marriage Has Greater Responsibility	"Because Peter and Amy are not married and may never be, it is not right that Peter shoul contribute to Tim and Kate's expenses...if married, then yes!" (Female, 42)
Impact of Child Support on Available Resources	"How much he can afford to pay given his other financial commitments" (Male, 36)

Comparisons between design cells were made to gain insight into reasoning that may have produced the interaction effects. Although the major themes were similar across cells, several minor cell-specific themes emerged.

A theme of prioritising Peter's biological family occurred in the Defacto, Child Support, Mother Not Employed condition. Participants believed the stepfather's "own children should be his main priority" (Female, 24; Male, 29), and he should "pay more for his kids as they're his own" (Female, 19). One of the participants expressed concern that allocating resources to the stepchildren could "put another family in poverty" (Male, 57). No such comments occurred in the equivalent Married condition, instead a single comment was made prioritising the stepfamily: "I hope that the new family nucleus is what these parents focus on" (Male, 40).

Concern with equitable contributions by the mother and stepfather was especially common in the Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Employed condition, and some participants seemed suspicious of the mother. One participant pointed out that Amy was "not slacking off and taking advantage of Peter" (Female, 23), another said the situation would need to be reassessed "if Amy starts to abuse the situation" (Male, 24).

Discussion

Overall, results show a normative expectation that stepfathers should contribute financially to raising their stepchildren. Perceived stepfather obligations were attributed most frequently to being a husband/partner, and sometimes to being a family member. Participants who perceived no obligation tended to emphasise the lack of a biological link to the children. This apparent tendency to define someone as 'family' (to either the wife or children) or 'non-family' supports the use of guidelines about genealogical/structural relationships in determining obligation (Finch, 1989). The same findings could also be taken as support for the justice motive perspective. Emphasising that the stepfather is not a biological relative stresses the distant or non-unit relationship, which would promote self-interest and low contributions as appropriate behaviour. Conversely identifying the stepfather as part of the couple or family group emphasises a closer unit or identity relationship, which accords with the greater

responsiveness to need and equality by these respondents. In this study participants appeared to weigh structural relationship factors against other situational factors, rather than simply making an initial decision to exclude or include individuals in the distribution as found by (Stum, 1999).

Results supported two of the hypotheses: both maternal employment and defacto marital status reduced perceived obligation of the stepfather. Consistent with Schaeffer (1990) qualitative comments showed working mothers were seen as more able to financially support themselves and their children, and therefore in less need of support from others. Need is an important consideration in judging obligation (Finch & Mason 1991). Participants not only referred to existing need, but also in low-need conditions mentioned that help should be provided in situations of emergency or need. Interestingly, the reduced need associated with maternal employment did not exempt stepfathers from contributing. Instead, there appeared to be a belief that sharing (even in small amounts) responsibilities is a central component of being a couple or family. Principles of equity and equality were also used in judging stepfathers' financial obligations.

The finding of lower obligation in defacto relationships appeared to be due to some, though not all, participants perceiving a lower level of commitment in non-married relationships, consistent with findings of Glezer (1991) and Qu (2003). Some participants believed that until marriage the stepfather has no obligations. Others suggested that live-in relationships could be casual or committed, which would influence the level of obligation they nominated. A number of participants, particularly in the Defacto, Mother Not Working conditions referred to the wording of the vignettes which described a 'mutual agreement' that the mother would not work. These respondents alluded to obligation created through volunteering for the provider role rather than obligation simply from being a stepfather.

Although stepfathers in the Married, Not Working conditions also had a stay-home wife due to mutual agreement, respondents focussed more on marital responsibility rather than choice.

The remaining hypothesis, that a stepfather's perceived obligation to stepchildren would be reduced when he had child support commitments to biological children was not supported. This was somewhat surprising as Schaeffer (1990) and Ganong et al (1995) both found that participants thought a father's child support payment should be reduced when he also had stepchildren to support. As obligations to biological children are generally considered stronger (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), it was expected that supporting biological children would be prioritised, reducing the resources available for stepchildren. And indeed, many participants (40%) in the conditions with child support obligations, mentioned child support, particularly the extra demand it placed on the stepfather's finances. Some also emphasised that child support meant he would have less available for stepchildren, yet this was not reflected in the quantitative results.

This finding was consistent with Smyth and Weston's (2005) participants recommending child support coming into the family should be influenced by the stepfather's income, but that payment going out of the household should not be affected by stepchildren. The inconsistency was attributed to framing effects, and this may also explain why support of stepchildren was not affected by outgoing child support. In addition, the surprisingly low amount nominated for the Defacto, No Children, Mother Works condition may be responsible for the effect of prior child support commitments not reaching significance.

The interaction shows that people respond to various family situations in quite different and sometimes unexpected ways. One possible interpretation of the interaction is that people only weighted marital status strongly when other circumstances were ambiguous due to an imbalance in the mother's need and the stepfather's capacity to provide. In a situation where

there is high need and high capacity, it may be easy to decide a high level of support should be provided. Likewise, when both need and capacity are low, it may be easy to nominate a lower figure. As both these situations involve a balance between what is required and what is available, people may not use the couple's marital status as a deciding factor. Hence the lack of influence of marital status in the No Children, No Work conditions, and the Children, Work conditions.

However, when the stepfather is supporting biological children (low capacity), and the mother is not working (high need), the imbalance between need and capacity creates an ambiguous situation. With competition for the stepfather's limited resources, people turn to marital status as a deciding factor. The theme of prioritising the biological children in the Defacto, Child Support, Mother Not Employed condition suggests participants perceived competition for limited resources, and saw defacto stepfamily members as having a less legitimate claim on stepfathers' resources than biological children or married stepfamily members.

Finally, when the mother is working (low need) and the stepfather has no child support obligations (high capacity) there is again an imbalance between need and capacity, and it is hypothesised that this led participants to be more influenced by marital status. On the surface, high need/ low capacity would not appear to be a problem. However, qualitative comments showed that in the Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Working there was greater concern with equity and concern the mother could 'take advantage'. Without entitlement created by marriage or need, the stepfather's greater available resources seemed to be considered to create an opportunity for exploitation. People tend to see inequities in marriages as less unfair than in other relationships (Baxter, 2001; Desmarais & Lerner, 1994), which could explain the lack of concern that the married mother might exploit her husband. This interpretation of the

interaction as due to ambiguities caused by an imbalance in maternal need and stepfathers' financial capacity is tentative and requires empirical investigation.

Limitations

Methodological issues resulted in several limitations. Firstly, the vignette technique is contextual, and therefore findings may relate to the context provided by the vignette, limiting generaliseability (Ganong & Coleman, 2005). Secondly, information on cultural background was gathered only to ensure a diverse sample was obtained. As kinship obligations are culturally constructed (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), further investigation of cultural differences is recommended.

Finally, combining the questionnaire with two child support questionnaires could have biased decision-making by providing a context that emphasises mandated obligations and the fairness of the contribution of the biological father. However, as this study is partially concerned with perceived stepfather obligations in relation to child support regulations and social policy, it is not necessarily a bad thing for participants to be using this as a frame of reference.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings have a number of theoretical implications. Firstly, there was support for the extension of distributive justice theory and justice motive theory into research on stepfamily responsibilities. Participants appeared to focus on factors such as need, capacity, equity, and to some extent, equality. Interestingly, some of these factors appeared to interact with each other and other family circumstances. Further research into how people use distributive justice concepts in complex situations is required, given that real family situations often are complex. In addition, further investigation of how people think about the different types of relationships

(unit/non-unit/identity) that may occur within a stepfamily, and how this affects perceived obligation would be valuable.

Results indicated that participants used many of the normative guidelines proposed by Finch (1989) in determining stepfathers' obligations. However, reciprocity was rarely mentioned, whereas other distributive justice principles were frequently used. Thus Finch's model may be improved by incorporating more distributive justice concepts. Research to clarify the conceptual relationship between normative obligations associated with kinship structures, and obligations arising from the use of certain distributive justice principles associated with family relationships from a justice motive theory would be useful to assess whether these approaches are both useful and can be integrated.

In addition there are practical implications. As Fleming (1999) argued, social policy based on a schema for families in which all the adults and children are strongly linked through biological ties or a couple relationship, may not fit stepfamilies well. Social policy that assumes cohabiting stepfathers will support stepchildren, when current findings show men in this position are normatively expected to contribute less than married stepfathers to stepchildren's upkeep, may not serve these children well. The public perception that men are only obligated to contribute towards their partners' children once the relationship has reached a certain level of seriousness makes it important to investigate how and when stepfathers are considered to acquire financial obligations to their partners' children, and the specific contributions that are considered fair, in order to create suitable policy for stepfamilies.

Conclusions and Areas For Future Research

This study has provided insight into public perceptions of the obligations of stepfathers to provide for stepchildren in different family situations. Overall, stepfathers were perceived as having some obligation to support stepchildren. However, the level of obligation perceived

varied a great deal from one individual to another. In addition, family characteristics such as maternal employment and marital status had a significant impact on perceived obligation.

As many aspects of this study were exploratory, replication is required. In addition, the findings of this study suggest a number of areas for future research. Firstly, the finding that perceptions of stepfathers' obligations to financially support stepchildren are so variable and influenced by many factors, indicates research is needed to shape policy that will not disadvantage children or place relationships under extra strain. In particular, investigation is needed to understand what stage a cohabiting stepfamily is considered to confer financial obligations for stepchildren and whether this obligation changes over time. Research with social policy in mind could also include details of income in the vignettes to measure more specific allocations, and also investigate whether stepfathers' obligation is considered purely as a moral responsibility or whether there would be support for policy that formalises these responsibilities.

The findings suggest normative guidelines proposed by Finch (1989) provide a useful model for understanding family obligations, but that the model could be improved by incorporating more distributive justice principles. Research examining the conceptual relationships and possible integration of normative expectations, distributive justice theory and justice motive theory would be valuable in order to provide a solid theoretical foundation for kinship obligation research that has been lacking (Coleman et al., 2000). In addition, research is needed to test the proposed explanation for the interaction.

This study has provided an initial exploration of public perceptions of stepfathers' obligations to financially support stepchildren in an Australian context. Increased understanding of this topic has practical implications for making social policy affecting the many Australian stepfamilies more fair and consistent. It also has theoretical implications,

providing an avenue for examining distributive justice concepts in complex family situations and the potential integration of three theories of family obligation allocation into a comprehensive framework.

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Appendix A
Information Sheet

Thank you for offering to help us with our research. We are three students enrolled in the 4th year Psychology program at Edith Cowan University: Krystle Borg, Miriam Maclean and Melanie Turner.

We are interested in how people think about financial arrangements in families following marital dissolution. The study involves reading a short description of three families in different circumstances and answering some questions about them. We will also ask you to give us some information about yourself – for example, your age – to help us make sure that we have the views of as wide a range of people as possible. We are not asking for your name, so this study will be completely anonymous. There are no right or wrong answers; we're simply interested in how people think about these issues. This will take no longer than 15 minutes in total.

Although the questions in the study relate to fictional situations, it is acknowledged that people can feel strongly about financial and family situations. If you experience any distress from participating in the project, please contact one of the support organisations listed at the bottom of the page.

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences Ethics Committee of Edith Cowan University.
If you have any questions, or would like to discuss anything about the study you can contact us on 0414 805 514 (Krystle), 0413 309 029 (Miriam) or 0402 153 615 (Melanie). Alternatively, if you would like to speak to one of our supervisors, you can contact Dr. Deirdre Drake on (08) 6304 5020 or Dr. Dianne McKillop on (08) 6304 5736. Should you wish to speak to someone who is not associated with this study you can contact Dr. Craig Speelman, the Head of the School of Psychology, on (08) 6304 5724.
Financial arrangements in families following marital dissolution is an important social issue and your help with this project is greatly appreciated.

Yours Sincerely,

Krystle Borg, Miriam Maclean and Melanie Turner

Please keep this information sheet for your own reference

Lifeline WA 13 11 14
Men's Line Australia 1300 789 978
The Samaritans 9381 5555

Appendix B
Demographic Data Sheet
GENERAL INFORMATION

Please note that this information is anonymous.
Do not record your name anywhere on any of the questionnaires.

As with all public opinion research, we need to be sure that the results represent the views of a range of people.

We would be grateful if you could supply the following general information so that we can ensure that we have reached people in a variety of social and demographic groups.

1 So that we know we have opinions from people in a range of age groups:

- Please advise your *age* ____

2 So that we know that both male and female views are represented:

- please advise whether you are *male* or *female* _____

3 So that we know we have opinions from people with and without partners:

- please tick to indicate whether you are

☐ *married, or living in a relationship similar to marriage* **OR**
☐ ***not*** *married, and* ***not*** *living in a relationship similar to marriage*

4 To ensure that we have the views of people with a range of education backgrounds:

- please tick to indicate every one of these boxes that describes you:

☐ *completed primary school*
☐ *completed year 10 of high school*
☐ *completed year 12 of hight school*
☐ *completed TAFE and/or trade qualifications*
☐ *completed undergraduate university degree*
☐ *Master or equivalent*
☐ *Doctorate*

5 So that we can acknowledge the cultural diversity represented:

- *please advise your cultural background* _____

6 Are you the biological parent of one or more children?

☐ yes
☐ no

7 Do you have a step-child or step-children?

☐ yes
☐ no

8 Have you had any dealings with the Family Law Court?

☐ yes
☐ no

9 How have these experiences been overall?

☐ positive
☐ negative

Thank you for your help. Please now answer the three brief questionnaires that follow.

Appendix C
Vignettes

Version 1

Amy and Peter are married. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter has no biological children of his own. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy is in paid work outside the home as well as caring for the children.

Version 2

Amy and Peter are married. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter pays child support for his two children from a previous marriage, who live with his former wife. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy is in paid work outside the home as well as caring for the children.

Version 3

Amy and Peter are living together. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter has no biological children of his own. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy is in paid work outside the home as well as caring for the children.

Version 4

Amy and Peter are living together. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter pays child support for his two children from a previous marriage, who live with his former wife. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy is in paid work outside the home as well as caring for the children.

Version 5

Amy and Peter are married. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter has no biological children of his own. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy stays home with the children and does not work outside the home.

Version 6

Amy and Peter are married. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter pays child support for his two children from a previous marriage, who live with his former wife. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy stays home with the children and does not work outside the home.

Version 7

Amy and Peter are living together. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter has no biological children of his own. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy stays home with the children and does not work outside the home.

Version 8

Amy and Peter are living together. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter pays child support for his two children from a previous marriage, who live with his former wife. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy stays home with the children and does not work outside the home.

Appendix D
Example Questionnaire, Vignette Version 1

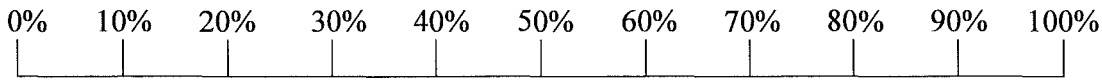
Amy and Peter's Story

Below is a story about a couple named Peter and Amy. Please read the story first, and then answer the questions that follow.

Amy and Peter are married. Amy's two children from her former marriage, Tim and Kate, are living with them. Amy receives some child support from her former husband. Peter has no biological children of his own. By mutual agreement between Amy and Peter, Amy is in paid work outside the home as well as caring for the children.

Questions

Question 1. Should Peter contribute towards the living expenses (food, clothes, education, entertainment) of Tim and Kate that are not met by child support? Please draw a slash / on the line below indicating what amount (if any) of Tim and Kate's unmet living costs you believe should be paid for by Peter:



None All

Question 2. Please tell us the reasons for your answer to Question 1 _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Question 3. What other factors are important in this sort of decision and how would they affect your answer? _____

_____

Appendix E
Data

Id#	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Parent	Step-Parent	Family Court	Fanily Court +/-	Vignette Marital	Child Support	Mother Works	Amount	Vignette
1	19	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	70	1
2	21	2	2	4	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	20	3
3	36	2	2	4	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	50	3
4	42	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	2	1	50	3
5	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	40	4
6	18	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
7	56	1	.	5	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	50	2
8	23	2	2	5	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	10	8
9	.	.	1	4	1	2	2	.	1	2	1	100	1
10	51	2	1	6	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	20	8
11	30	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	100	7
12	84	1	2	4	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	50	7
13	58	1	.	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	80	1
14	42	1	2	5	1	1	2	.	1	1	2	70	6
15	42	2	1	7	1	2	2	.	2	2	2	100	7
16	54	2	2	5	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	100	2
17	60	2	1	5	2	1	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
18	75	2	.	7	1	1	2	.	1	1	1	25	2
19	51	1	1	3	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	45	4
20	55	2	.	6	1	2	2	.	1	2	1	50	1
21	46	2	1	5	1	1	2	.	1	1	2	20	6
22	52	1	2	5	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	20	6
23	58	2	1	6	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	50	7
24	40	1	2	4	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	50	6
25	62	2	2	4	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	50	4

Id#	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Parent	Step-Parent	Family Court	Fanily Court +/-	Vignette Marital	Child Support	Mother Works	Amount	Vignette
26	52	1	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	1	1	100	4
27	44	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	2	2	100	7
28	44	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	1	2	50	8
29	25	1	1	4	1	.	2	.	2	1	1	0	4
30	45	1	2	4	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	50	6
31	21	2	2	4	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	0	3
32	38	2	1	4	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	40	3
33	74	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	20	6
34	65	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	50	6
35	54	2	1	4	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	50	5
36	36	1	2	5	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	100	8
37	37	2	1	4	1	2	2	.	2	1	1	100	4
38	51	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	2	1	2	10	8
39	56	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	30	5
40	60	1	1	4	1	2	2	.	1	1	1	10	2
41	29	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	60	1
42	31	2	1	4	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	0	4
43	32	1	2	2	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
44	27	1	1	4	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	100	8
45	47	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
46	58	2	2	5	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	25	2
47	61	1	.	6	1	2	2	.	2	1	2	25	8
48	32	1	1	2	1	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
49	19	2	2	3	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	70	4
50	24	2	1	3	1	2	2	.	1	2	1	100	1

Id#	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Parent	Step-Parent	Family Court	Fanily Court +/-	Vignette Marital	Child Support	Mother Works	Amount	Vignette
51	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	20	3
52	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	0	5
53	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	85	7
54	45	1	1	4	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	0	6
55	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	20	2
56	18	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	30	1
57	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
58	18	2	2	5	2	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
59	22	1	2	4	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	75	8
60	28	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	50	7
61	30	1	2	4	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	50	1
62	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	50	5
63	34	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
64	20	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	75	7
65	22	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	100	2
66	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	30	8
67	28	1	1	4	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	70	4
68	59	2	2	4	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	60	6
69	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	20	4
70	22	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	70	5
71	20	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	30	5
72	20	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	50	4
73	20	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
74	20	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	70	7
75	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	85	5

Id#	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Parent	Step-Parent	Family Court	Fanily Court +/-	Vignette Marital	Child Support	Mother Works	Amount	Vignette
76	45	2	2	5	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
77	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	100	7
78	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	65	1
79	20	2	2	5	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	50	3
80	47	1	1	3	1	2	2	.	2	1	1	100	4
81	20	1	.	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	0	8
82	18	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	45	1
83	24	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	95	5
84	20	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	0	5
85	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	100	8
86	20	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	100	7
87	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	75	7
88	28	2	2	4	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	50	2
89	30	2	1	5	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	90	4
90	19	1	2	4	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	60	1
91	19	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
92	18	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
93	22	1	1	4	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	30	5
94	18	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	60	2
95	24	2	2	4	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	45	8
96	19	2	2	5	1	2	2	.	2	2	1	65	3
97	21	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
98	50	1	1	5	1	1	1	.	1	1	2	100	6
99	30	2	1	4	2	1	2	.	1	2	1	15	1
100	48	2	2	4	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	100	3

Id#	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Parent	Step-Parent	Family Court	Fanily Court +/-	Vignette Marital	Child Support	Mother Works	Amount	Vignette
101	52	2	1	4	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
102	38	2	2	4	1	2	2	.	2	2	1	50	3
103	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	50	8
104	23	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	50	3
105	23	2	2	4	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	50	8
106	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	35	3
107	20	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	30	7
108	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	30	4
109	35	2	1	5	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	50	1
110	22	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	0	3
111	45	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
112	51	2	2	5	1	2	1	2	2	1	2	30	8
113	20	2	2	3	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	70	6
114	23	2	2	2	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	40	3
115	23	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	50	1
116	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	50	1
117	27	2	2	4	1	2	2	.	1	2	1	50	1
118	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	20	3
119	19	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	50	7
120	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	100	1
121	36	2	1	5	2	1	2	.	2	2	1	50	3
122	19	2	1	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	100	7
123	18	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	100	7
124	20	2	2	4	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	20	2
125	42	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	50	5
126	32	2	1	2	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	70	7
127	39	1	2	2	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6

Id#	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Parent	Step-Parent	Family Court	Family Court +/-	Vignette Marital	Child Support	Mother Works	Amount	Vignette
128	40	1	2	5	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	50	1
129	42	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	2	2	2	15	7
130	32	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	50	4
131	60	2	1	3	1	2	2	.	2	1	1	40	3
132	51	1	1	3	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
133	17	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	100	7
134	55	1	1	6	1	2	2	.	2	2	1	30	3
135	61	2	1	4	1	2	2	.	2	2	1	0	3
136	42	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	2	1	50	1
137	48	1	1	2	1	1	2	.	2	1	1	60	4
138	48	1	1	2	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	20	5
139	29	1	1	6	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	100	8
140	34	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	2	1	10	3
141	35	1	1	5	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
142	33	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	20	6
143	44	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	2	2	50	7
144	19	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	50	4
145	47	2	1	5	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	80	8
146	39	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	70	6
147	48	2	1	1	1	1	2	.	2	2	1	100	3
148	18	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	30	4
149	29	2	1	5	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
150	43	2	2	4	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	10	2
151	47	1	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	1	1	50	4
152	27	2	2	5	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	25	4
153	40	1	2	4	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
154	43	1	1	6	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5

Id#	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Parent	Step-Parent	Family Court	Family Court +/-	Vignette Marital	Child Support	Mother Works	Amount	Vignette
155	33	2	1	4	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
156	20	2	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	80	7
157	32	2	2	4	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	20	1
158	37	1	2	6	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
159	32	1	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	80	5
160	52	2	2	6	2	2	2	.	2	2	2	0	7
161	30	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	2	1	2	50	8
162	35	1	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	1	1	100	2
163	57	1	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	1	2	25	8
164	56	2	1	4	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	0	8
165	47	1	1	4	1	2	2	.	2	1	1	50	4
166	25	1	2	3	2	2	2	.	2	1	2	50	8
167	76	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	1	2	1	100	1
168	38	2	2	5	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
169	83	2	1	3	1	2	2	.	2	1	2	10	8
170	34	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	2	2	2	0	7
171	62	1	1	2	1	2	2	.	2	1	2	25	8
172	32	2	1	4	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	0	3
173	.	.	.	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	100	8
174	56	2	1	2	1	1	2	.	2	1	2	30	8
175	65	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	30	3
176	57	1	1	5	1	2	2	.	2	1	1	100	4
177	60	2	2	4	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	60	5
178	68	1	1	4	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	0	6
179	54	2	1	4	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
180	53	2	1	2	1	2	2	.	2	2	2	30	7
181	32	2	1	4	1	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2

Id#	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Parent	Step-Parent	Family Court	Fanily Court +/-	Vignette Marital	Child Support	Mother Works	Amount	Vignette
182	19	2	2	4	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	15	3
183	18	1	2	4	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
184	21	2	2	4	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
185	25	2	2	2	2	2	2	.	1	1	1	50	2
186	19	1	2	4	2	2	2	.	1	1	2	50	6
187	20	2	.	5	2	2	2	.	1	2	2	35	5
188	.	.	.	2	1	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
189	76	1	1	2	1	2	2	.	1	2	1	0	1
190	94	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	1	1	5	2
191	28	2	1	4	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	30	1
192	28	2	1	5	1	2	2	.	1	2	2	100	5
193	37	2	.	4	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	50	1
194	63	1	.	4	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	10	4
195	47	2	1	4	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	100	7
196	24	1	2	4	2	2	2	.	2	2	1	40	3
197	21	2	2	4	2	2	2	.	1	1	2	100	6
198	22	2	1	5	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	35	4
199	29	1	1	5	2	2	2	.	1	2	1	100	1
200	21	2	2	5	2	2	2	.	2	1	1	10	4

Key

Id#	Participant identification number
Age	Participant's age
Sex	1 = Male, 2 = Female
Marital Status	1 = Married or living in a relationship similar to marriage 2 = Not married and not living in a relationship similar to marriage
Education Level	1 = completed primary school, 2 = completed year 10 3 = completed year 12, 4 = completed TAFE/trade qualification 5 = completed university undergraduate degree, 6 = completed Masters degree or equivalent, 7 = completed Doctorate
Parent	Participant is a biological parent, 1 = yes, 2 = no
Step-Parent	Participant has stepchildren, 1 = yes, 2 = no
Family Court +/-	How were experiences (with Family Law Court) 1 = positive, 2 = negative
Vignette Marital	Marital status of stepfather in vignette, 1 = married, 2 = not married
Child support	Vignette stepfather has biological children to support, 1 = yes, 2 = no
Mother works	Mother in vignette is employed, 1 = yes, 2 = no
Amount	Percentage amount marked on a scale indicating how much of the stepchildren's costs not covered by child support should be paid by the stepfather
Vignette	Version of the vignette the participant received: 1 Married, No Child Support, Mother Employed 2 Married, Child Support, Mother Employed 3 Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Employed 4 Defacto, Child Support, Mother Employed 5 Married, No Child Support, Mother Not Employed 6 Married, Child Support, Mother Not Employed 7 Defacto, No Child Support, Mother Not Employed 8 Defacto, Child Support, Mother Not Employed

Nominated Journal

The research project is aimed at being suitable for publication in an APA journal. Guidelines to authors request manuscripts of up to 25-30 pages in length, in a standard font. Formatting is in accordance with the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5th ed.).